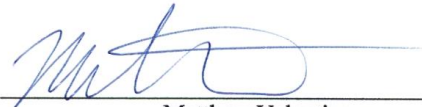


EVERYWHERE TEETH
A COLLECTION OF ANIMAL STORIES

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To Blue, a very good boy, and to all the other good boys and good girls of the world. Furry, feathered, scaly, or otherwise, thank you for enriching our lives and our hearts.

And to my family, for never believing I was anything short of the best writer ever. Also because Dad would kill me if I dedicated this to the dog but not to him.

ABSTRACT

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Since the earliest recorded days of human existence, from early cave paintings to modern children's cartoons and bestselling novels, our narratives have prominently featured animals living alongside humans. Just as their presence in the world has shaped the human experience, their presence in our creative narratives shapes the experience of the human characters with whom they share these stories. They may be portrayed as fearsome adversaries, or loyal companions, or so anthropomorphized that they may as well be humans themselves. Yet regardless of how they are characterized, our inclusion of animals in creative narratives is reflective of the relationships we have with nonhuman creatures, and of the human condition and imagination as a whole.

This thesis takes the form of a collection of short stories, each featuring animal characters living alongside human ones. The species represented and the degree to which the animal characters feature will vary from story to story, but each will examine the different relationships that the human characters have with the animals in their lives. In each story, the human characters will experience personal character growth that is related to—or even caused by—their affinity for the animals to whom they are close. In this way, each story will demonstrate the idea that people's relationships with animals speak to their character as humans, and can even engender growth and maturation under certain conditions.

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When I was little, my favorite movie was *The Lion King*. Many layers of memory underlay the image of a five- or six-year-old me sitting on the floor of my room, the dark green carpet pressing indentations into my legs as I played the ending scene—the one where Simba claims his throne on Pride Rock under a life-bringing rain—over and over. At some point, I figured out how to rewind the VHS myself. A terrible day for my parents, probably. I still have that cassette; the picture is streaked with black lines in those places where I wore the tape thin.

I went through phases in my childhood, most of them centered around some animal-centric book or movie. The royal epic of *The Lion King* was just the first of many. After that, it was *The Fox and the Hound* and its story of enduring friendship in spite of natural differences. Then it was *The Berenstain Bears*, with the titular bears' quaint lifestyle and humble moral lessons. I fell hard for animal-centric book series like *Warrior Cats* and *Redwall*. Even now, the movie version of *How to Train Your Dragon* remains one of my favorite narratives ever.

Humans couldn't hold my attention. If I wanted to see humans, I could just stare at myself in the mirror. But the adventures of an animal—that was novel. Sometimes they walked on all fours and waged violent political battles; other times they wore cute sweaters and learned lessons about sharing. No matter what they did, I was enthralled. Part of me

wanted to be one. In my daydreams, I envisioned myself as a great roaring lion or a lithe housecat weaving through the underbrush. I can't think of a Halloween where I *wasn't* an animal. One would think that I did this because it's fun to pretend to be something different (indeed, I often wished I had two-inch fangs and powerful legs that could launch me thirty feet lengthwise), but beyond that, I saw myself in these fictional critters. They didn't look like me, but they had the same emotions and tethers and desires in their hearts as I did. I just wanted to meet them halfway between the worlds of human and animal.

So after a lifetime of watching and reading stories featuring animal characters, it seemed fitting that I should write a few myself. I didn't have many story ideas going in, so I just wrote, hoping I could fling a light into my dim imagination and shine it on an idea worth developing. I found premises, and from there I found plots. I kept writing, but as I did, I noticed that even though I set out to write about animals, I really wasn't doing that at all. Instead, humans were the focus of my writing. One of my stories only featured one animal, and it was only mentioned occasionally; another didn't have any animal characters at all. I thought my thesis was going off the rails. I'd have to change the title, rewrite the abstract. Figure out what threads bound the individual stories together, if not the animals. Not wanting to do that, I took stock of all the works that inspired me, from the realistic to the fantastic, all the *Old Yellers* and *Lion Kings* of the world, trying to figure out what made those works so compelling and what I could do to emulate those elements.

A couple of the examples I recalled belong to a small genre known as "xenofiction." Xenofictional works seek to accurately portray the thoughts and feelings of non-human, non-anthropomorphic characters from their own point of view. There's a lot of science fiction in

this genre, which wasn't what I wanted to write, but there are also examples that are considered "literary" (rather than "genre") fiction. Perhaps the most famous of these is Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, which tells a straightforward story of a dog's transition from housepet to sled dog to wild beast. Here, London really does attempt to portray the inside of a dog's mind as something feral and foreign, and canine social structures as being lawless and incomprehensible to humans. I actually think he overdoes it. The dogs in the story frequently do things (like going berserk and killing other dogs with little provocation) that anyone with an intimate knowledge of animal psychology, canine or otherwise, would recognize as unrealistic. It feels almost like Jack London thought that since dogs are not human, he had to make them as un-human as possible—but then the narrative comes across as brutal and unfeeling when it doesn't need to be. Dogs, and indeed many animals, are not so wildly different from people that we can't understand where they're coming from; this was one of the points I was eager to get across in my writing. Whatever tone I wanted for my animal stories, it certainly wasn't this one.

There's another, less famous book that I found closer to what I was going for. It's a Scholastic children's book by Ann M. Martin, titled *A Dog's Life*. It tells the story of a stray dog named Squirrel, whose only goal is survival and, if she can swing it, comfort. Despite the novel's first-person perspective, Squirrel is not particularly anthropomorphized; her emotional spectrum, physical abilities, and psychology are realistically rendered, at least for the most part. She goes through a variety of owners, none of whom stick around (until the end, where she finds her perfect human). When Squirrel is on her own, she only worries about avoiding danger and finding her next meal. We do see Squirrel experience the whole gamut of human treatment—from the cruel to the negligent to the loving. This makes the

reader feel for her, perhaps inspires them to treat their pets better, but it's not the point. Squirrel doesn't dwell on it; dogs don't tend to dwell. She only moves toward her next source of happiness.

The tone of *A Dog's Life* is straightforward and humble, as I imagine a dog's mind to be, rather than savage. I found it entertaining—and *The Call of the Wild*, for all my criticism of it, was also a thrilling read. But there was still the question whether these books are really *instructive* to a human audience. Neither one spends a lot of time preaching a moral. *Call of the Wild* reads like an A-to-Z adventure story about a dog slipping out of the metaphysical collar of human society, which itself isn't really a commentary on human society. *A Dog's Life*, by contrast, is about a dog going from stray to housepet and back again several times over; while the young reader might hug their pet a bit closer after they finish the book, that's an incidental message that doesn't speak much to the human experience.

This isn't to say that stories about animals with no human focus aren't valuable for what they are. Humans aren't the only beings of importance in this world; there are other creatures' stories to be told. However, since my own advisor was the person who bid me to read an essay asserting that the purpose of literature is "to entertain and instruct," I felt like I had a duty to tell stories that a human audience could both relate to and apply practically to their own lives. To this end, I looked at other books involving animals that I thought accomplished this goal, and I was surprised at how many of my inspirations fell into this category. That got me thinking, and I wondered, to what extent were most of these supposed "animal stories" really about those animals, and to what extent were they actually just stories about humans dressed up in an animal skin?

There exists a philosophical concept known as “anthropocentrism,” which, as one might guess, is the idea that human morals and constructs are the center of the universe. Everything else is peripheral, relevant only as it pertains to us. The more “animal” works I studied, the more I realized the prevalence of this concept in literature and other media—humans, it seemed, were always the focus, even when they weren’t billed as such. There were two possible ways in which a work could be anthropocentric: Either the books co-featured humans and animals, allowing the humans to steal the show, or the animal characters were so anthropomorphic (mentally or physically) that they could be replaced with humans without destroying the narrative. Sometimes, both elements were at play.

The first two books I studied are ones that I consider to be spiritual siblings to each other, despite them being very different in tone: *A Dog’s Purpose* (Cameron) and *The Art of Racing in the Rain* (Stein). Both of these are written from the point of view of canine protagonists in the care of their beloved human owners. They’re written in the first person, so the narrative follows the dogs closely, but this also means that they are very anthropomorphized in terms of their intelligence. The protagonist of *A Dog’s Purpose* (usually called Bailey, though he is called by many names across many lifetimes) is portrayed as a dopey, lovable golden retriever of mostly ordinary canine intelligence, aside from the liberties that have to be taken to allow him to narrate a book. He sometimes fails to fully understand the affairs of the people around him, leaving the reader to piece together what’s happening with the humans based on Bailey’s objective report of what they’re doing. But he has his own agenda, a character goal that is indicative of high-order thinking—he wants to find his purpose in life. A realistically portrayed dog would never get so existential, but it gets the audience invested in Bailey’s story. Now the reader sees him not just as a cute dog

who does dog things, but as a relatable character with hopes and desires that resemble their own.

In *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, protagonist Enzo is even more anthropomorphic in his presentation than Bailey is. Bailey's narration is simple and straightforward, but Enzo narrates with humanlike verve and wit, and shows more than ordinary canine intelligence throughout his story. (For instance, he claims that humans do not allow dogs to vote in elections because all dogs take a progressive stance on social issues. Hilarious, yes. Animal, no.) His goal is to be reincarnated as a human, because he all but self-identifies as one. And now the reader identifies not only with Enzo's voice, but with what he wants out of life.

The respective stories of Bailey and Enzo happen under the noses of humans—and both books portray the stories of these humans under the conceit of the dogs living their lives, working toward their goals. Bailey sees his favorite human, a boy named Ethan, grow into a talented young athlete who becomes sullen and lonely after a career-ending injury. A couple reincarnations later, Bailey seeks out an elderly Ethan and helps him marry his old girlfriend and bring him satisfaction after an unfulfilling life. This, Bailey realizes, was his purpose all along. His whole story plays out in the service of his master. And Enzo doesn't really *do* much in *Racing in the Rain* except snark and be a comfort to Denny, his owner, whose life is a cavalcade of misery for most of the book until he wins full custody of his daughter and moves to Italy to become a professional racecar driver, at which point Enzo dies and is reincarnated as a human boy years later.

There isn't really any denying that *A Dog's Purpose* and *Racing in the Rain* are stories about humans told through the eyes of dogs, as much as (or more than) they are stories about

the dogs themselves. They are anthropocentric. Even the dogs' elevated intelligence and existential musings might be enough to push these books into anthropocentric territory already.

Upon reflection, I've also realized that neither of these books devotes a whole lot of time to exploring the relationship between dog and owner, man and beast. They're seen lovingly interacting, but largely they just coexist. One of the reasons I loved *How to Train Your Dragon* (DeBlois and Sanders) was because of its heavy emphasis on how Hiccup, a human, and Toothless, a dragon, are most effective when they work as a team. Hiccup, while intelligent, has no physical prowess; and Toothless, while powerful, has an injured tail fin and needs Hiccup's help to fly. This spirit of equal partnership extends to the other humans and their dragons as the dragons integrate into a human society that once sought to kill them. This franchise does a better job at letting the humans and animals share the spotlight as a cohesive unit, but even still, the morals preached in *How to Train Your Dragon* come from Hiccup and his fellow tribesmen's character growth. They speak to the importance of challenging cultural preconceptions and taking responsibility for one's past misdeeds. The humans are the ones who benefit morally from their relationship with animals. It's fun to imagine flying to the horizon with your loyal dragon companion, but those human lessons are what give the story lasting merit.

It makes sense that works that include human characters are going to have some human focus in them, even if they are ostensibly not the main characters. But what about works where there are few or no humans present? A lot of these are on the order of children's fantasy. There is a long-running young adult book series known as *Redwall* by Brian Jacques.

It has a lot of Tolkien-esque fantasy elements, except all the humanoid races are replaced with races of woodland animals. These animals are *very* anthropomorphic. They wear human clothes and express the full spectrum of human emotions. They live in human towns and follow human religions. They are the humans of their world—humans as we know them don't seem to exist. It's the same thing with the movie *Zootopia* (Howard and Moore) and its modern setting. The characters are animals, and this is critical to the narrative and world-building (this isn't really true in *Redwall*), because the existence of species-specific stereotypes is used as a plot device—and as a vessel for a human-centric moral lesson. The idea of *Zootopia* is to teach children about the existence of racism, including casual racism, and the importance of celebrating each other's differences and working together in spite of them. All the animal puns in the world can't pull *Zootopia* from the realm of anthropocentrism.

It's not hard to see why all these animal-themed works tend to tell human stories. Writers are generally human, as far as we know, as are readers and viewers. It makes sense that we tell and consume stories with characters that people can understand and relate to. This human touch is what separates a beloved epic like *The Lion King* from a livestream of a pride of lions. This isn't to say that the livestream wouldn't be valuable. Lions are cool. They're ecologically important. It would be entertaining. It just might not be instructive, on a moral level, to an audience of humans.

If it is true that all of these animal stories are primarily anthropocentric, it does raise another question: Why bother telling them at all? Why not just make all the characters

human, cut out the middleman? There are several possible reasons, and some combination of all of them probably inspired most animal stories out there:

For one thing, especially in works that are geared toward children and/or meant to be allegorical, animals make a useful conduit for teaching moral lessons. Many species have stereotypical “personality” traits associated with them, which children are taught from a young age; making a character a certain species is convenient shorthand for in-depth characterization. To use examples from my own stories, it makes sense that a character associated with bats would be reserved and nervous, and a character associated with dragons would be beautiful and self-centered. Aesop’s fable *The Tortoise and the Hare* is another good example. A reader, especially a young reader, can be expected to know going in that tortoises are slow and hares are fast; the moral lesson behind the slow, persistent tortoise beating the quick, arrogant hare is easier to get across when the legwork of characterization has already been done. Again, Disney’s *Zootopia* uses pre-existing animal stereotypes (e.g., foxes are sneaky, rabbits are timid) and subverts them to make a point about the dangers of prejudice in society—without having to explain the nuances of real-world racism to an audience of youngsters.

Another potential reason for telling human stories through an animal lens is that they provide an opportunity for defamiliarization, an artistic technique of presenting familiar things and situations in unfamiliar ways, in order enhance the perception of those things. As I mentioned in my discussion of *A Dog’s Purpose*, canine narrator Bailey presents the words and actions of his humans in an objective manner, and sometimes proffers his own mistaken interpretation of what’s going on—but the reader, if they’re paying attention, can piece

together the real story of why the people are doing those things. In one scene, Bailey describes his teenage owner making out with his girlfriend as them “lying next to each other” and making noises that sound like “eating food;” the reader presumably chuckles and thinks about how strange that must look to an objective third party. To use the *Zootopia* example again, a viewer might look at how this society of animals is prejudiced against predators, a minority group, and think that this is unfair—and then remember that modern-day America has the same issues. The audience is forced to examine human actions and issues from a different perspective. They have to pay more attention and think about things for longer, and if they think for long enough, they may come to a new and better understanding of something they thought they knew everything about, which they can then apply to their own lives.

Finally, one of the simpler reasons that humans might want to tell these animal stories is that it’s human nature to anthropomorphize things. It’s why we put googly eyes on our cars and give them names. It’s why we dress our pets in cute seasonal sweaters. I think my dog has the IQ of a tree stump, but I still look at him and wonder what he thinks about. We write from the animals’ point of view as a creative exercise, but then make them more and more like us. We can’t help it. In a lot of cases, the animals we write about anthropomorphize themselves enough to where we can easily see ourselves in them, no creative liberties required. Dogs make popular story candidates because they have social structures and emotional spectra that mirror our own; recent research shows that dogs have the emotional range of human toddlers. Dolphins have elements of their society that we think of as distinctly human, like individual names and “best friends.” African wild dogs can vote on group decisions by sneezing a certain number of times. We identify with animals because they really are like us, and we really are like them. It makes sense—we’ve evolved for the

same amount of time under the same conditions, and from the same common ancestors; it makes sense that we would show a lot of the same emotions and social structures.

Not to mention the amount of personal growth that individual humans can experience from interacting with animals. Many people tell stories of learning responsibility when they got their first pet, and learning how to cope with grief and loss fifteen years later. It may be because we are so similar that we grow so attached, and we mold ourselves in accordance with what we think is best for them, just as we do with our fellow humans.

After so much thinking, it came clear to me that when I chose my thesis topic, I wasn't just inspired by my love for the animals themselves (although that was part of it). I was inspired by the growth I'd experienced from having animals in my life, the same growth that likely inspired so many of the works I've cited. My thesis wasn't going off the rails. Instead, I was following a literary tradition of showcasing not just humans, and not just animals, but the two worlds coming together. I decided I was going to tell the stories of human character development resulting from the characters' relationships with the animals in their lives. In all three of the stories I wrote, at least one human character finds themselves facing a struggle that is related to—or maybe even caused by—their affinity for their animals, and in each one, those humans push through their challenges and emerge as more confident, mature, and responsible people by journey's end.

Bats in the Belfry

A long time ago, in a land very far away, a young fruit bat found himself in the unfortunate situation of being trapped in a thick marsh and tossed about by a slaving pack of hyena-men. They didn't seem interested in eating him. They were more likely to use him for toothpicks later. Instead, they had their sights set on the bigger, meatier members of his party: an armored blue dragon, an ice-bending snow leopardess, and a great many-tailed golden vixen who served as their tactician.

"Fire at will!" the fox commanded. Through the chaos, the bat sharpened his focus and let loose an arrow through the open mouth of one of the monsters, killing it instantly.

The dragon took the command literally and cast his bolt of fire through the pack. The bat felt the heat on his wings and hoped that he wouldn't be crisp-fried along with them. By the time the smoke cleared, two foes had fallen dead into the swamp, and the rest were howling from the pain of their burns.

"Be very careful what you do with that fire," the leopardess said between slashes. In response, the dragon snorted.

"I'd say you don't get to complain, you big tail-dragger!"

"Shut up!" It was true, she was responsible for the attack—they would have passed through the gauntlet without a fight, had it not been for her long tail sticking out from the thicket they'd tried to hide in. They all knew it, and she knew it most of all, and so she fought

with all her ferocity to redeem herself. With a rallying cry, she raised a block of ice out of the marshy ground, and it burst into a volley of shards that she sent flying into the fray.

For a moment, the bat thought the flechettes might pierce him too, but each one found its mark in the hide of an enemy, felling three and wounding several more. The party cheered. No doubt the leopardess would be the heroine of the hour—if they survived. And given that caveat, the feeling of triumph was brief. There were only a handful of them against an untold number of adversaries, and everyone had taken at least a few hits. For many adventurers, this was where the journey ended, reduced to scraps between the teeth of monsters like these. If their party couldn't turn things around, they would soon go down the same path.

“Callum.”

Perhaps from a higher vantage point, the bat thought, *I could see what's going on, and then we—*

“Callum!”

Callum raised his head from where it rested atop the head of his bat costume, which he had taken off and set on the table next to his dice. It was one of a row of similar animal heads that lay on the table in front of their human owners. Across from him, the resinous green eyes of the fox tactician stared at him from their own resting spot. This head belonged to Aurora, the dungeon master, who had been trying to get his attention for half a minute.

“Your action?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

From his left, Juniper the snow leopard chimed in: "I've weakend a few; you've got the chance to take one out now."

"Well, I'm a bit low on health...." He checked his stat sheet. Six hit points remaining. At this point, a stiff breeze would put him out of the game for good. "I think I'll fly up and try to get a better idea of what we're up against."

Aurora nodded. "Wise choice. I'll let you roll for perception."

Callum cast his die, ran the numbers, and reported his outcome with his head lowered. A ten.

"You succeed in taking off past the canopy and see that the group consists only of Gnolls, but the foliage is so thick that you can't tell how many there are."

All sighed. Even Aurora, who was not a merciful game master, seemed dismayed at her carefully wrought campaign falling to ruin. No one spoke until Dane picked up his metal-scaled dragon head from the table and said, "We can come back to this tomorrow. Y'all suit up. It's time for the dance."

The dance! Callum had almost forgotten. The first rave of the convention was due to start in five minutes. As compelling as the campaign was, he couldn't miss this chance to show off his recently commissioned fursuit. He donned his costume head, and likewise Juniper and Aurora put on theirs, and there they were, animals again. To most, they were just humans in animal suits, but to Callum, they were as real and feral here as he saw them all in his mind's eye. They removed their paw gloves only to put away their dice, and then walked side by side through the bustling convention center to the big ballroom.

The four of them were among the first few dozen to arrive, and in the absence of any shared body heat, Callum shivered. The air conditioning was cranked to the max to keep the fursuiters from overheating, but his own costume was more of a wingsuit than a fursuit. Aside from the padded head, it had little in the way of insulation to stave off the cold. He shrugged it off. It was nothing a few swigs from his hip flask and some dancing wouldn't fix.

"Callum!" a muffled young woman's voice sounded from somewhere in the mix. Callum looked to see a golden-scaled pangolin making her way toward the edge of the dance floor where he was. Beneath the costume was Todge, the sixteen-year-old girl from whom he had purchased his own suit six months prior.

"Todge!" Callum clapped his hand-paw against the pangolin's leather pauldron in greeting. "Good to see you here!"

"Glad to be here! How are you liking the suit?"

Callum was beaming, not that it mattered—Todge couldn't see his real face, and the suit head was always smiling anyway. "I couldn't possibly love it more. This is my first convention with it, so, you know. Pretty stoked."

For ten minutes, they stood there, not noticing the crowd thickening as they talked. Todge said that this was her first convention without her parents; she was old enough now to go without them. They were reticent, but signed the papers nonetheless on the grounds that she had friends in the community to look out for her. She had the money to pay for her own room and board; her drawing and suit-making businesses were starting to expand to the point where she'd had to buy some professional-grade equipment and quit soccer to keep up. Her parents, she said, were wary of that too. What it would look like on her college

applications. She said that running a successful niche business would look better on a resume than participation in any school sport, which they accepted, but they were still freaked out by her clientele and almost intimidated by the amount of money she had to throw around.

“They’ll come around,” she said with a final nod. “They just need time to warm up to it. Like they did with the furry thing.”

“That’s good.” It was all Callum could say. He couldn’t relate. By the time he’d discovered the furry world, he had a paid internship and no need for anyone to sign a permission slip. Now he had a master’s in aerospace engineering, a salary, vacation time, and nobody who cared to ask where he was going except out of curiosity. The highest authority in his life was his boss, and he could only control so much of what Callum did. He didn’t know what he’d do if he had to tell the boss where he was really going on the odd four-day weekend. Shriveling up and die, perhaps. Kiss those raises goodbye.

Likewise, Todge didn’t really understand any of that stuff, which was just as well. They found they could no longer hear each other over all the music and people. It was time to dance.

It was hard to tell the passage of time at a party like this. It was too much hassle to pull out one’s phone to check; there were people to talk to; there was booze involved for the adults. So for some indeterminate length of time, Callum alternated between the dance floor, where he could spin around with his cool new wings half-stretched, and the periphery, where he could talk to the other con-goers.

“I never thought’d I’d be one of these fursuit people,” he kept telling people. He was always really afraid of Chuck-E-Cheese as a kid, and was on the verge of having a nervous

breakdown beneath his bored emo teen façade at Disney World. Even though fursuits were less dead-eyed than the ratty mascots, he never understood the hype. They were just people in silly costumes. But after receiving his first paycheck at his new job, he couldn't think of anything in the world he'd rather spend it on. Since then it was all he could focus on at conventions, the craftsmanship and the design choices and what they all meant to each person. "Why gryphon?" he kept asking, or, "Why eagle?" He paid attention to the flyers in particular. Even across ages and professions, he could always find some common ground with a flyer.

This was great, Callum thought as he danced. This was fantastic. So many times, he'd talked himself out of buying furry stuff, said he didn't have the money, didn't have the space. He had plenty of money, and a whole sparsely decorated apartment and office to show things off. Really, he was afraid that a friend—or a colleague, God forbid—would ask why he had a bat plushie on his desk and he wouldn't have a good enough answer. At home, he often wished he had that stuff around, but here, it was everywhere, in art rooms and vendor halls and on the bodies of every fifth person in the whole hotel—including *his*. The fursuit wasn't a splurge; it was an investment. There was no shame when he was inside it. He had become this character he'd made for himself, and now he felt like he really could fly up and away to where no friend or boss or anybody could reach him.

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Callum was tall enough to see over all but the bulkiest of fursuits, so he could see straight to the center of the dance floor. There, a pack of teenagers went from standing upright to hunched and heaving, all at about the same time. Their heads and torsos bobbed

in time with the music and nearly in unison. He couldn't hear anything over the bass, and his vision in this costume was limited, but it appeared to Callum like some kind of group dance.

Kids these days, he thought. *In my day, we had mosh pits*. He kept dancing. A few others around him raised their heads, but they too eventually went on their way. The music kept pumping; the con-goers kept raving. It wasn't until the miasma began to ripple outward that anyone else realized something was wrong.

The people without costumes—that was most of them—went down first. They hunched over and coughed into the crooks of their elbows and started to weave toward the exit. This was enough to get Callum to stop moving, and now, with his breathing deep and steady, he felt it. It began as a tingle in his mucous membranes, a few scattered embers in his nose and throat that were fanned with each breath. He coughed once, all the way from his diaphragm, then again, and several times after that until he realized he couldn't stop, he couldn't breathe; his head was insulated and all that air was just circulating.

He grappled for his suit head and pulled it off, squinting against the haze and the new fluorescent lighting that had just been turned on. The music went down, and the sounds of coughing were brought into relief. The kids in the middle were dry-heaving the hardest, but the whole room was starting to feel it now. Security could barely manage a breath to scream, "Everybody out!"

The door quickly bottlenecked with non-costumers trying to escape to the parking lot; those wearing fursuits were stuck clamoring behind them. Some had taken their heads off already and had begun to help those who were struggling. Others took it upon themselves

to push ahead and usher people through. It was several minutes before the last of them—including Callum—made it outside into the hot, sticky, blessedly clean air.

It took Callum a long time to stop coughing. His belly ached; he felt like he might vomit with each successive heave, but only dry air came out. Still more coughs raked through his chest. His face was a mess of snot and tears. He could blink them away only for a few seconds at a time, long enough to see flashes of the confusion around him. There were fursuiters sitting on curbs and parking blocks, holding their fake heads in their laps and their real heads in their hands. Some were in bad shape, being tended to by friends and strangers. Many were talking into their phones. Several young teens—possibly those at the epicenter—were among them, waiting for their families at the hotel entrance beneath a banner that read, “Welcome Furries.”

The clinking of scales preceded Dane, who came up from behind Callum and coughed a few times in his ear.

“Ugh,” was the first thing he managed to say, still wiping tears from his eyes. “Hoo boy. Ain’t a con until the sirens show up, huh?”

“Every time.” Were he really a fruit bat, Callum would have heard the sirens long before anyone else, but only now did he notice their distant echo. Police and ambulance sirens, for sure. “I don’t know who would do something like this.”

“Yeah. I wonder. I gotta”—he wheezed—“I gotta go wipe down my suit...”

Dane was lucky. His suit was mostly metal and would be easy to clean. Callum was similarly fortunate; his wings were leathery and his body fur mostly short plush. The only

problem area was the thick orange neck ruff that still smelled like pepper. He brought it to his nose and took a whiff, which set him on a coughing jag that left still more tears on his cheeks. The suit would have to be trash-bagged until he got home.

“Meet you back at the room?” Callum called after Dane, who nodded. “I’m gonna look for Aurora and Juniper. If they’re already up there, text me.”

After circling the parking lot, there was no sign of either Juniper or Aurora. Callum called for them, and asked people if they’d seen a snow leopard or a fox about (this was pointless; half the costumers were big cats or foxes), but his only lead was the intermittent coughing that echoed from a nearby stairwell, source unseen.

Callum lurched toward the well, stumbling over his heavy suit paws. “Juniper?” he asked. “Aurora?” But all he found sitting on the steps was a headless pangolin with one hand ungloved and clutching an asthma inhaler.

“Todge!”

“Cal,” she said, “I’m so glad you’re here.” She coughed more. “I need help.”

“What—why are you up here?” Callum crouched beside her, softening his face and voice to speak. “Where are your friends?”

“I couldn’t find them. I needed somewhere quiet.”

“Okay. Okay. That’s fine, I’ll help you out. What do you need?”

“I gotta get to the hospital,” she said. “I’m not gonna die, I just...I can’t stop....”

“You need an ambulance?” Todge shook her head. “Uber? I’ll get you an Uber.”

“Already got one.” She set her inhaler down and unlocked her phone to give to Callum.

“Just call my mom,” she choked out.

Dangerous territory, Callum thought. He wasn’t sure he was equipped to handle a frantic parent, especially not one he already knew to be nervous. Still, he scrolled through the contacts until he hit “Mom,” and positioned his finger over the call button. Then, he hesitated.

“Hey, Todge?”

“Yeah?”

“I feel like I ought to know this, but what is your real name?”

Todge hemmed and cleared her throat. “Michelle,” she rasped.

“Michelle?” Callum smiled. “Pleased to meet you, Michelle. I’m Jeff.”

After he’d worked up the courage to press the button, the phone rang once, twice, three times with no answer. On the fourth, Callum thought maybe he’d get off the hook, but there was no such luck. A sleep-slowed woman’s voice sounded on the other end. “Hello?”

“Um, hello,” Callum said, almost trembling. “I’m calling about your daughter Michelle. She’s fine, but, uh, there’s been an incident...”

“*What?*”

“We were at this dance, there was some kind of pepper spray released. I don’t know about the details, but she wanted me to tell you she’s going to the hospital.”

“Oh my God,” the woman said, but it didn’t sound like she was talking to Callum. There were rustling noises, drawers slamming, a man’s voice mumbling in the background...

Callum blurted as much information out as he could manage. “She’s breathing, she’s talking to me, she’s just coughing a lot—”

The phone beeped twice. Callum tried to keep talking, but his voice dissipated into the silence. Wide-eyed, he handed the phone back to Todge.

“They live about an hour away—*urk*. Ugh. They’ll meet me there.” She wheezed. “It’s gonna be hell.”

“Can you text them where you’ll be?”

“They track my location.”

Rough life, Callum thought.

“The Uber is two minutes out,” she said. “Do you think you can come with me?”

“Like, to the hospital?” Todge nodded. His first thought was, *No way, no way in hell am I going to the hospital with a sixteen-year-old girl*. Not when her parents would be showing up. Not when he was still half a fruit bat. But she had to face her parents and go out in public as half a pangolin no matter what. She wasn’t the same professional young woman he’d met six months ago; it was clear, with her bedraggled blonde hair and red-rimmed eyes, that Todge was a *child*, and Callum was an adult, and that was that. “Of course. Of course I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks.” She pulled herself to her feet, clinging to the railing to keep steady. Callum offered to help, but she shook her head, so he gathered both their loose fursuit parts in his arms and followed her back to the main lot.

-

Callum shivered in the ER waiting room. It was cold already, and he’d put his fursuit in the trash bag that the staff had given him, leaving him clad in cool-fit running clothes. He was curled up in a cushioned chair, trying to hug some warmth to himself as he scrolled through the con’s Telegram chat. Some few hundred people were typing at once, so the conversation scrolled so fast on its own that he was able to pick up no more information than if he’d been walking through a crowded room.

...had to be on purpose...

...could have been an accident...

...domestic terrorism...

...not jump to conclusions...

There was no point to this. It was too much to follow and it was only making him feel sick. He shelved the group chat and responded to private messages from friends, among them Aurora and Juniper, asking if he was okay. He told the rest of his gang where he was and apologized—he’d be coming in late—but they assured him it was fine, really, he was doing a good thing. Aurora, speaking of good things, had gone to the store and bought trash bags, medicine, bottled water, and anything people had requested, all with her own money.

Juniper had stayed behind to help guide parents to their teenagers. Dane was reportedly still handing out cheeseburgers to anyone who looked sad.

“I’m proud of you guys,” he texted them, smiling for the first time in an hour.

“And I’m very proud of you,” Aurora replied.

He didn’t have time to say anything else. He got a ping from Todge that said she was out of treatment, could he please wait with her until her parents arrived. A nurse brought him up to her room; she was half-reclining in bed with her hair in tangles and her suit in a bag on the chair.

“You can move the suit if you wanna sit down,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, but she didn’t cough.

“Thanks, thanks. How you feelin’?”

“Much better.” Again, she motioned for him to sit down. “They gave me some steroids. Good stuff. I’m sorry for keeping you so late.”

Callum grinned. “Hey, bats are nocturnal.”

“Heh.” Todge looked at her phone. “My parents are gonna be here in, like, twenty minutes.”

“I didn’t mean to freak them out earlier.”

Todge shook her head. “S’not your fault. Mom would’ve freaked out no matter what.” Her eyes glassed over with tears. “She was so nervous about me going alone. I finally convinced her nothing bad would happen, and now look.”

"It was hardly your fault."

"My mom didn't want me involved with furies in the first place. She thinks they're weird."

Callum squawked. "She's not wrong."

"Like, in a bad way."

"I know." Callum had met a lot of people that wouldn't help his defense of furies. No actual perverts. Just people who could stand to take a few more showers and watch less anime. People who were so nerdy that even he wanted to give them a wedgie. "Sometimes I see real weirdos who like the same things I like, and I just think, if you're this weird..."

Todge finished his sentence: "Then what does that say about me?"

"Exactly!" He laughed. "And I'm like, I didn't ask for this, all I wanted to do was share cool animal videos with people."

"I love animal videos!" Todge pulled out her phone and began typing with gusto. "I saw this really neat video about wolves the other day, you're gonna love it..."

-

Todge's mother arrived a few minutes later. They heard her clamoring down the hallway long before she reached the room, and when she did come in, she didn't waste time with pleasantries.

"Dammit, Michelle, you're not doing this anymore!" She slung her purse off her shoulder and onto the floor. Her hair, wavy like her daughter's, was in knots. Her eyes were

purply dark all around. Callum thought if she were a furry, she'd have to be a raccoon. "I told you this was a bad idea, and look!"

"Mom, it wasn't anyone at the con's fault—"

"It doesn't matter whose fault it was, being with these people is dangerous for you!" Callum backed up against the wall, wide-eyed, as Mrs. Todge's Mom carried on about freaks and weirdos and predators. "They even dress up as predators!" she sputtered.

A paunchy guy in a paint-stained shirt wandered in soon after. He nodded to the nurse, who was happy to scurry out of the room. Callum was tempted to do the same.

"Dad, I'm sorry," Todge said as the man walked to her side.

"It's okay, honey," he said. "We're here now."

With Todge occupied, her mother whirled upon Callum, who could not have been pressed further against the wall. "How old are you? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?"

"I—"

"What kind of grown man pays a teenager two thousand dollars to make him an animal costume?" She continued, "And what are you even doing here? With my *child*?"

Callum was back on his heels, his palms up and open. His primal brain scrambled for a response, cycling through the things he used to say to his mother. *I don't know! It wasn't me! I swear!* "She asked for my help."

"You ought to thank him," Todge said. Her mother turned away from Callum, who peeled himself from the wall and grabbed his fursuit bag.

Todge's father nodded at him. "We've got it from here."

"Okay. I was gonna go anyway, I just..."

"Will you be able to get to the hotel?" Todge asked.

"I'll figure something out," he said, and left the room without another word.

Once he was outside, away from any observers, whatever adrenaline had been numbing his mind seeped away, and he found himself with tears in his eyes that he couldn't blame on the pepper spray. He kicked a pebble in some random direction, hoping it wouldn't hit anything, but he could barely see his surroundings to make sure. He could just make out one of those new rental scooters parked by the bushes. The hotel wasn't far from here, and that would be cheaper than a ride home at bar-closing hour. He took it out, slung his fursuit bag over his shoulder, and sped off with blurry eyes and a bad mood that lasted for the rest of the night.

-

Callum's phone rang before sunrise. He peered through sleep-fogged eyes to see that it was work calling him. At the crack of dawn. On a Saturday. When he had already said he was going to be out of town. If he had obeyed his first impulse, he would have hurled the phone out the window and gone back to sleep. Instead, he sent a wordless apology to his roommates and picked up like a proper adult.

"Morning, Jeff!"

"Sir?" Callum was too groggy to use the man's real name, but to him, he may as well not have had one. 'Sir' was all anyone ever called him. "What's the trouble?"

“Well, I’m watching the news, and I saw this thing about a convention getting maced.”
Upon closer listening, there was newscast-ish chatter in the background. “You’re there, right?”

Shit, how did he find out? Through the haze of sleep, Callum remembered that the boss had finally gotten out of him that he was going to what he’d called a “nerd convention” in Pittsburgh. He thought it was a safe enough thing to say. The boss was something of a geezer and had probably never heard of furies. Even if he had, who could be bothered to look up what conventions were in Pittsburgh over the weekend?

“Um...yes, yes. I’m at the convention.”

“What was it again?” he asked in his puzzled old-guy voice. “Fuzzies?”

“Furies.” Callum winced. “It’s not what you might think it is.”

“I’m not concerned about what it is,” he said. Callum was torn between saying *please don’t judge* and *please don’t tell* until he heard, “I was calling to ask if you were affected.”

“Uh...yeah.” Callum sat up. The noise roused Dane to look up at him from his spot on the pull-out couch, and by now Juniper and Aurora had both woken up and were watching with vague interest. “Yes, I was there. I got hit. I had to take somebody to the hospital.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, it was a long night, but physically, I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah.” The boss’s breath crackled on the other end of the line. “Well, Jeff, I won’t keep you. Just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“I am.” At last finding his manners, Callum added, “I do appreciate it.”

“Always. You’re welcome to work from home next couple of days. Rest up a bit.”

“Um...thank you, sir. I’ll consider that.”

The boss hung up with barely another word, and Callum crawled back under the covers while his roommates tried to settle back in. “Sorry about that, guys,” he muttered.

“No problem,” Aurora said. “We’ve all got jobs.”

Juniper nodded. “Your boss seems nice.”

“Yeah, I guess he is.”

They all went on to sleep fitfully until noon. The only reason they got up even then was because the convention chairman had called an emergency town hall after last night. The regular ballroom was still being aired out, the chairman had said on the group forum, so everyone had to pack into the auxiliary one. By the time Callum and company arrived, all the chairs had been taken. There were people sitting on the floor and leaning against the walls. The room was warm with the heat of hundreds of tightly packed bodies, not helped by the fact that they hadn’t cranked the A/C. Only a few people were in suit.

The four of them took their place against the back wall and watched the chairman adjust the microphone. He was known to them as Thunderheart Tiger, but he didn’t look like

a bombastic golden tiger now. Here he was a thirty-something wearing business casual and a haggard expression as he positioned the microphone by his face.

“Um, hello. Welcome,” he said, voice raw. He had definitely not slept since the incident. “Thank you all for coming to my panel.”

“You’re welcome,” some guy—a guy who sounded like he’d already had a *lot* of beer—said from the back. A few people chuckled, but all the voices fell stale in the silence.

“Okay. Um....” Thunderheart shifted in front of the microphone, and everyone seemed to shift with him under the tension, the taut string that yoked them all together. “Well, I’m sure you all want to know more about what happened at the dance last night. I’ll start with what we know...”

Thunderheart confirmed what they all suspected, that it was common pepper spray that got released at the rave. No one suffered any lasting complications, but some were hit harder than others, and a few people had to go to the hospital.

I could have told them all that, Callum thought.

“Next, what we don’t know. We do not know who the perpetrator was. We’re working with hotel security and they’re going through their footage, but nothing has come of it yet. But we don’t know if it was even done on purpose. Lots of people carry pepper spray. It may have just been an accident.”

The string snapped. People began talking, a few voices rising above the general murmur. *It had to have been on purpose,* they said. *You’d have to spray a whole can for it to*

affect a whole big room. People could have been killed. Someone was trying to scare us. The whole convention could be called off.

“Guys, please!” Thunderheart yelled. He yanked the microphone, causing it to screech, and the room quieted. “You should know we have no intention of calling off the convention. If someone was trying to scare us, to bully us, then calling off the con would be tantamount to saying they won. Can we have that?”

“No!” people shouted.

“That’s what I thought!” Thunderheart smiled. “Half the reason I called you in here is that I wanted to applaud you all for an amazing response to a bad situation. We had people up all night helping—staff, volunteers, regular attendees. All of you were first responders last night. I’d like to give some shout-outs, if I may...”

Everyone cheered as Thunderheart called out the names of each person who had helped. Aurora, Juniper, and Dane all made the list. Special mention went to those who’d tended to the more badly affected, and while Callum was not mentioned individually, he found himself holding his chest out a bit further. Donations to the convention’s designated charity, a nearby service dog academy, had doubled overnight and were projected to reach five figures by the end of the weekend. A handful of attendees had started up a collection for those who needed to get their fursuits professionally cleaned, and a local dry cleaner had reached out to offer discounted services with proof of attendance.

“I’m very proud of all of you,” Thunderheart said. The clapping became more scattered as he began to wind down to the end of his speech. A few people put on their fursuit heads. “We can’t say for sure if this was an act of violence, but in any case, I think we’ve done

our part to show the world what our community is really made of. You have all shown your mettle this weekend. I hope you all continue to enjoy the convention..."

Callum didn't hear the rest of the speech. He had his nose buried in his schedule pamphlet. There was a meetup in about an hour for flying animals; he'd been looking forward to that all weekend. A panel on asexuality at two. That sounded interesting. Dance competition at three. He began marking things with the pencil in his pocket, considering, planning...

"Cal," Dane said. He looked up to find that the gathering had mostly dispersed around him; they were among the last few left. "I think I'm gonna go back to the room and rest up a bit. What about you?"

Callum looked at his schedule. He had a free hour to rest—but he also had several hundred dollars to spend in the vendors' den. He'd seen people selling animal-themed pins and stickers, hand-drawn *Pokémon* prints, and even a stuffed fruit bat like he'd always wanted. He was done telling himself he didn't really need them, that he had nowhere to put them. He had a whole office to bling out. Forget resting, he decided. There were things to do.

"Nah, I think I'm gonna go buy some stuff. Commission some art, probably." He could use a couple more laminated sketches of Callum the friendly fruit bat to hang from his lanyard. "I've got a busy day ahead."

"Ah. So if I don't see you again, I'll meet you at the game room at seven?"

Callum grinned. "Sure thing."

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Twenty-four hours prior, four adventurers had set out on what they thought would be a peaceful exploration mission, only to find themselves fighting for their lives in a thick, dark swamp. There was blood, monster and otherwise, sprinkled on the moss and mixed in with the puddles. Their weapons were damaged; their armor was about to fall off. It would have been the end, were it not for a sudden smokescreen that bubbled from the ground and overtook the horde of monsters, leaving them blinded and wheezing.

The young fruit bat finished muttering his incantation and flapped his large wings, casting wave after wave of smoke over the beasts and away from his companions. No one needed to be told to run. They wove through trees and under bushes until they found a cave, some shelter where they could lick their wounds and plan their next move.

“Is everyone alright?” the fox asked, emptying her pack of medicines onto the rocks.

Wordlessly, they nodded. There were some bruises and plenty of lacerations, even a broken bone or two, but everyone was alive.

“What do you think?” the fox continued. “Should we head back to camp?”

The other members of the party exchanged glances. The bat expected his friends to jump on this idea, and though he wanted to press onward, he couldn’t deny the wisdom of such a decision. He waited for them to speak, but no one spoke. He turned to the fox and shook his head, as did the others. They’d come so far, and the treasure they were seeking was so close.

“It is settled,” said the fox.

The four of them took what medicines they needed and bedded down for the night, letting the cool rock leech the pain from their wounds as they slept. In the morning, they awoke to find themselves strong again, and together they set out again on their journey.

Resident Assistant Field Manual, Draft 1, 3/16/18

by Paulette Lai and Company

Introduction

Dear new RA,

If you are reading this, then I and my cohort have graduated, possibly years ago. By now we might be grown and flown, off to our postgraduate schooling and careers. You probably never knew me, or any of us. But several years ago, I was where you are now. I had just been hired to my Resident Assistant position, which I happily maintained through the rest of my college career. In those years, I grew a lot, but when I started out, I didn't have the faintest idea of how to do my job. I imagine that if you're also just starting out, then neither do you. It is my goal that by the end of this field manual, you will better understand both your role as an RA and the policies by which you must abide, so that you might not struggle as I did.

The primary purpose of this manual is to provide standard operating procedures for a number of situations, common or not, that you may encounter in the line of duty. Don't close the book just yet—I promise this won't just be a treatise on rules and regulations. None of us would stand for that. From here out, my coworkers and I will be stepping in to offer our own advice and, in many cases, personal anecdotes that help bring to light the reasons why these rules are in place, and what can go wrong when they are not obeyed.

[More blather, ask someone else to help write later]

Section 1: Critters

Section 1.1: Pet Policies

Unfortunately for the animal lovers among us, one's choice of pets when living in a dorm is limited. With the exception of registered service and/or emotional support animals (see the attached pamphlet), the only pets that are allowed in the residence halls are small, non-dangerous fish, to be kept in a tank no larger than ten gallons. Only one fishtank is permitted per resident room. [Note to self: Attach service animal pamphlet from Disability Services]

Other pets, however small and harmless they may seem, are not permitted in the residence halls under any circumstances. While it may seem unlikely that a resident could conceal an illicit pet for longer than a few days, or would even dare to try, I can tell you from personal experience that it does happen.¹ Should you come across a resident's pet that you're sure they're not supposed to have, the proper thing to do is call the on-duty hall director and have them handle the situation for you.

¹ This is a story from my very early days as an RA, when I was young and stupid. You may very well judge me for this one. I know I deserve it. But here it goes anyway: At the start of my first year on the job, my roommate Ed and I adopted a bearded dragon.

We did not act in haste. Ed might've, if I'd let him, but I never did anything quickly, so I insisted we research everything about the genus that made up the common "bearded dragon" umbrella in preparation for our new friend's arrival. So as with anything, I threw myself with gusto into the broad world of lizard husbandry—terrariums, feeds, heat lamps, cute little Halloween costumes—and shared everything I found with Ed. He was particularly in love with the little chainmail suit and the dragon wings. He said he'd make the wings if I made the suit. I told him it was a deal.

I thought this was all a big joke, if an elaborate one. Ed had a history of harebrained ideas like this one, cartoonish schemes which he would plan in detail as though he actually meant to carry them out. His ex-girlfriend and my new coworker Geneva described him as a manic pixie dream dude. He would draw up blueprints and tell everyone in his life as though it was a certainty, like *this* was the one, *this* time he really was going to hang a zipline between the engineering hall and the big dorm. I knew he was kidding, and *he* knew he was kidding, but he still gave me the urge to show up on the roof of the tallest building on campus in full bungee gear at his appointed time, fully expecting to find him up there too.

So I played along with the bearded dragon thing for the whole of RA training, on the grounds that this plan, like all the others, would be abandoned for some shining new idea in due time. While we sat through endless sessions on the importance of policy enforcement, I looked up costume ideas. While we had group discussions on how to lead by example for our residents, Ed texted me his plans for a system

of curtains around the dragon's cage that could be opened or closed from a distance, to hide him in an emergency. As I was hiding inside an empty storage chest during one of our staff-wide games of hide-and-seek late at night, with the whole building to ourselves, I researched the best suppliers of mealworms and sand. And as I became enamored with my new job and my new coworkers, all of us determined to be great leaders and make a difference in people's lives, I plotted my own downfall.

I should have noticed that it wasn't blowing over by the time he moved in after training was over. This was my fault. I was having too much fun designing bearded dragon shirts to care that Ed had actually bought a terrarium. That should've been the tipping point, but I figured the thing would join his collection of expensive dust collectors, along with the unicycle and the guitar. I can't remember the exact moment it dawned on me that I was about to get more deeply involved in this lizard thing than I'd intended. Perhaps it was when I got in the car to accompany Ed to Herpetopia, the most reputable of all the stores we'd looked at. More likely, it was when we were inside and he was talking to one of the handlers and said, "Yes, I'm intending to buy today." That might've been it.

In any case, it had definitely hit me by the time the handler set the big orange lizard in Ed's outstretched hands and congratulated him on becoming a father. Ed handed the dragon to me while he got things set up with the pet carrier, and I held him at arm's length to look him over. His scales were sandy and rough beneath my fingertips. He smelled musky; that's what my room was going to smell like

when I had residents over. He cocked his head and rolled one eye forward to stare at me back. His neck ruff flared with every exhale, and he rolled one eye forward to stare at me back, flat-faced, as if thinking, *That is one ugly critter right there.* And I thought, *Dear God, I'm an idiot.*

Ed named the dragon Smaug. I'm sure he thought he was clever. I'd chosen a Middle-earth theme for my floor, and Ed, like me, had grown up on a diet of fantasy books and video games, so he was eager to help me bring it to life. I had already spent a week painstakingly drawing a Tolkien-esque map of campus over one of my bulletin boards, complete with a fire-breathing wyvern draped over our dorm in the middle. The only thing I needed was a real dragon. And I had to admit, he was pretty cute. He had golden-orange scales and a plump pink tongue and a mouth that curled into a perpetual smile. He enjoyed hanging out in jacket pockets and had a thing for blueberries. I could forget for a moment that this was all very illegal, and there was no way I wouldn't be blamed for this if (when) we were found out and that would be the end of my awesome new job.

I spent the next week carving the flags of Gondor and Rohan into sheets of paper for decorations and devising elaborate excuses for why we had this giant lizard in our room and how I didn't know about it, and as the days passed and the sky didn't come crashing down, I relaxed. Perhaps things would be all right, and I could convince Ed to give Smaug to a friend or something before we were discovered. That

didn't last long, because I came into my room one day to find Geneva sitting in my chair next to Ed, laughing and gushing over Smaug.

I'd only known Geneva for a few weeks, but I thought of her like I thought of Smaug—golden and beautiful, outwardly charming. But her presence somehow set me on edge. She could sense this, like she could sense every insecurity, and assured me that it was fine, it was Ed's problem if he got caught, she wouldn't say anything. "I know we had a lot of training sessions on how to lead by example," she said, "but we had just as many about how to be team players." And this was her, being a team player. She'd never tell.

I didn't feel any better. Geneva had spent all training snapping at me and then telling me how great I was, often within the same minute. One time during a session, apropos of nothing, she leaned over to tell me how I was one of the best new RAs she'd ever seen, and she knew I was destined for greatness. I smiled, trying to listen to the presentation. When the presenter said something I knew would be important later, I took to my phone to write it down, and Geneva shout-whispered, "Get off your phone! This is important! You need to get better about paying attention." And then the entire staff turned to look at me. It was like that all the time, at seemingly random intervals. Even her kindest words pinged unpleasantly in my ears, like she knew how she wanted to sound but couldn't quite hit the right tone. A slightly sour violin.

Anyway, she'd been waiting for me to show up. She had something she wanted to discuss. She'd heard I was trying to get two shifts covered, and she was willing to take them both, provided I could pay her back sometime. Not at a specific time, just eventually. No need to email Moe, our boss, with the plan. It'd be simpler if we didn't. Think nothing of it, friend. That's what being a team player is all about.

"So, deal?" she asked.

After a moment's pause, I nodded. "Uh...thanks a bunch. I appreciate it."

She stood and sashayed out the door. Ed smiled and said, "That was nice of her." I decided to go to the desk and calm down there.

My friend Soraya, another older RA, was working when I got down there. I sat on the gritty linoleum floor behind her, messing with the letter mail in the plastic USPS bins, and I refused her offer of a chair several times. After some minutes of me awkwardly shuffling about behind her, she got the idea to ask me what was up. I told her a bit about Geneva and the shifts—of course I left out Smaug—and she became so upset that I was afraid I'd done something. It wasn't me, she said. Instead she carried on about "that bitch" with the kind of anger that could only come from someone who'd gotten bit before. She stood and paced around the room, slamming her hands on the granite countertops, full of *how dare shes* and *the nerves*. I had to take over the computer while she ranted. At one point, she bobbed her head so

emphatically that her hijab fell to her shoulders and she clawed at her head to get it back on before anyone saw. We both laughed pretty hard. I felt better until she said, “She’s doing this to look like a hero because she’s applying for the head RA position.” A promotion of sorts, a position of mentorship to younger RAs. The only true claim to authority any RA could ever have. I hoped it was the cooling blast from the air vent that made me shiver.

I couldn’t let her make me so indebted to her, she said. If I’d known how right she was, I would’ve followed my first instinct and said no way—but I needed the help, and she made such a big to-do about it that I thought she’d react poorly if I turned her down. What was I to say? *Sorry, I can’t let you cover my shift because I think you’re crooked?* I’d be in Moe’s office answering for my roommate’s pet bearded dragon within an hour, and it was a Sunday. No matter. It was a simple exchange. She’d work my shifts, I’d work two of hers, that’d be the end of it. I’d never have her help me again.

So I let Geneva work my shifts over one weekend for a total of eight hours, which was fine. I could make that up in an evening. I asked her when I could work for her in return, and she shook her head. She didn’t need anything done yet. She’d tell me if something came up.

“Sure thing,” I said, from inside the dragon’s gullet. “I’ll be waiting.”

For weeks, I waited, keeping my schedule clear on the days I knew she had work, but the request never came. She'd come by the desk when I was working and just *hang out* there, and in my nervousness, I made plenty of mistakes, all of which she noticed. *You have to have the security camera window on the left side of your screen*, she'd say. *It lets you see everything better. I can't believe you didn't know that. Don't you know anything?* She would say things like, "Do you know the procedure for calling maintenance after hours?" and I would say yes, but I'd appreciate her refreshing my memory. Then she'd kindly tell me and say, loud enough for Moe to hear from his office, "You should've known that yourself. You must not have been paying attention during training." And then when my shift was over, I'd go back to my room and cry for an hour.

Often, Ed would find me crying, and always he'd say the same thing: "Paulette, I broke up with Geneva for a reason. You're where I was last year." I kept asking him, then begging him, to tell her to leave me alone, but he said it was never so easy with Geneva. You could go to her with a legitimate grievance and by the end of the conversation, *you'd* be groveling to *her*, and you'd leave convinced she'd done you a favor by making you see the error of your ways. All he could do to comfort me was dress Smaug in a funny outfit and let me hold him for a while.

I took to telling Soraya about these things, since Ed was little help, and any attempt to bring it to Moe was met with a shrug. Soraya said that it was futile; she loved everything about Moe as a boss, except

for the fact that he was blind. Gossip was frowned upon, with Geneva being the staff's biggest crusader against it (I wonder why), but hearing Soraya rant about "that bitch" was cathartic. And it helped that she was standing next to me when Geneva texted that she had a shift she wanted covered in, oh, about an hour, even though Soraya and I were getting ready to go bowling.

"You don't have to take that," Soraya said. I lowered my head, apologized, and told Geneva I'd be there soon. *You're amazing!* she texted back. *We're all so lucky to have you. XOXO :)*

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Between the bearded dragon and the other dragon, the one that lay slumbering in her lair about a hundred feet above my head, I turned into a nervous wreck and mostly stayed in my room. I did a lot of chainmailing and embroidery; I played a lot of video games; and, for those moments, I was a happy consumer of tiny metal rings and fantasy games. I still tensed up whenever my phone dinged, and I still dragged my feet to every meeting. I dragged more slowly than ever to my performance evaluation with Moe, which was less than stellar. I was a bit shaky on some procedures, according to Geneva's observations, and I needed to find a better way of dealing with my "interpersonal conflicts" than going to him or another coworker. I wanted to say that if I confronted Geneva directly, she'd yell at me so loud that my skin would fly off and my flesh would melt from my bones, and then he'd have a skeleton for an employee, and nobody would want that. Instead, I said "yes, sir."

At the end of the next week was Winter Break Eve. Dawn of the final day. The day it all went down in an inferno. It was the day of our all-staff social, a bit of mandatory fun where whoever was on duty got to pawn their responsibilities off on another dorm's RAs and join the staff on a low-budget excursion. This year's plan was ice skating. We'd made our reservation two months ago. I didn't know who was working, but it wasn't me, so I invited Ed to be my plus-one and didn't think about it until about fifteen minutes before our scheduled departure, when my phone dinged.

Hey girl, I forgot to ask anyone to help me out, so I need you to cover part of my on-call shift so I can go ice skating tonight, Geneva said. I know you don't like ice skating, so I figured you'd be okay with it.

I've saved all my texts from this exchange to this day. *I love ice skating. I've been excited about this all year,* I replied just before walking out the door. She waited until I got into Ed's car and sat next to Soraya before saying anything else.

Look, I really need you to cover. I'm applying for head RA, so it looks bad if I'm not there. Nobody will care if you stay home.

"That *bitch*," Soraya said from over my shoulder. "She did this to me all the time."

Remember, I did your job for you three months ago, and you still haven't paid me back. The absolute least you could do here is your job.

So that was it, then. She'd been holding on to that old favor just for this moment. Thunder cracked behind my eyes. She *tricked* me! I knew it! She knew she had me by the conscience, and she tricked me over and over. I *hated* her! But this was my chance. I had the advantage. Geneva was always careful to do things off the books, but now she'd have to leave a paper trail. I didn't care what happened to me anymore. I'd set myself ablaze just for the chance to bring her down with me.

Soraya, Ed and I spent several minutes crafting the perfect professional response, something even Geneva couldn't corrupt. What we decided on was this: *Gen, I'm very sorry, but I'm already on the way to the skate rink. I understand that this is important to you, and that I owe you a favor, which I will happily do for you if given sufficient notice next semester. I know not everyone on staff wanted to do this. One of them might be willing to help you.*

I remember tracking the three little dots popping across my screen, the drumroll to my final sentence. Beside me, Soraya was messing with her phone. The message popped. *Okay. Soraya offered to cover. She's applying for head RA too, so this will make her look bad. You owe her a big thank-you. I don't think your behavior here was appropriate, so I will be telling Moe about this tonight.*

We turned around to drop Soraya off. I couldn't stop thanking her and shivering. This was it. My last night on the job. Soraya got out of the car and said, "Don't worry, I'll run interference with Moe tonight. You just focus on enjoying yourself and packing up later."

I didn't move to the front seat, even when it was only me and Ed in the car. "So, you stood up for yourself," he said.

"Yep." I had to smile. "Sméagol is free!"

Ed laughed. "Dobby has no master," he said in a squeaky voice. "Dobby is a free elf."

I told all my coworkers what happened when we got there. They all said things like "congratulations" and "it took you long enough." Until this point, I didn't know anyone except Soraya was on my side. I figured they thought I was a shitty coworker, because Geneva had me so cowed into submission that all they ever heard from me was through her. I chased the high of freedom around the ice rink for hours. Nobody could tell me what to do anymore. Not Geneva, not Moe. Not even Ed. I pulled him aside and said it would be best if he took Smaug to stay with a friend or something while he packed up. He said, "I was thinking the same thing."

The high didn't last. When we got back to the room, the full reality of what Geneva had said began to sink in. She'd be talking to Moe, and she said she wanted to talk to me, too. I became hysterical. I took it out on Ed. I told him he was a terrible friend, letting me risk everything over his stupid pet lizard while he risked nothing, letting his untrustworthy ex-girlfriend into the room to see it in the first place, and letting

her run roughshod over me for months, and now look. I was going to be fired, and he needed to start looking for a new place to live.

I think I scared him, poor Ed, because he left the room in a hurry, and Soraya came in shortly thereafter. I set upon her just like I'd done with Ed. I never wanted to stand up to Geneva; I'd just wanted to keep the peace. And now I'd sacrificed my job for the sake of her petty revenge for some past misdeed that she'd never even disclosed to me. I was running around the room in terror and bumping into things. She couldn't even speak for all my crying and babbling. She held out her palms, the white flags of surrender, and hushed me until I quieted enough for her to speak.

"First off, this was your revenge as much as it was mine," she said, and I didn't really disagree. "Second, I can sit outside while you talk to Geneva. You can hear everything through these walls. I'll take everything that helps your case back to Moe." I sniffled and wiped my eyes on my shirt. "Now, better?"

I nodded. "Sorry for yelling at you," I said. The apples of her cheeks rose in a smile.

"All is forgiven." As she turned to leave, she did a double-take at Smaug's cage, and I cringed. "That sure is a funny-looking goldfish you've got there."

"Sorry," I muttered. "That's Ed's. I told him to get it out of here."

"For the best."

“I’m worried Geneva might tell Moe.”

“Is that what all this is about?” Soraya shook her head. “I wish you’d told me. I don’t think Geneva would do that. She’d do other things, but not that.” She held up her phone and waggled it in the air. “Besides, bitch has, like, five handles of vodka in her room. I’ve got pics if you need ‘em. Anyway, text if you need me.”

Geneva called me soon thereafter. She was furious. Said I had to meet her in the kitchen right now. I texted Soraya and then presented myself to Geneva for evisceration. Oh, how she yelled. I nearly bit my tongue off not yelling back, knowing Soraya was eavesdropping outside. She told me how unreliable I was, flaking out on my job, requesting help but not repaying it. All the other RAs, my friends, secretly thought I was shitty. They just never said anything. She was the only one with the guts to tell me, so she was really doing me a favor. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I believed her. I didn’t speak to defend myself. Maybe she’d manipulated me on the matter of shift coverage, but the little mistakes, the not knowing things, that was all me. Maybe I deserved this even without the bearded dragon. Perhaps I wasn’t good enough for this job.

And maybe I also deserved my checkered evaluation with Moe, which she touched on. I didn’t point out that all the things he corrected me on were the things that I suspected Geneva of engineering on purpose. I just slouched in abject submission, and then she scoffed at me for tearing up.

“Why are you mad?” I almost shouted, surprising even me. “I gave you the exact reaction you wanted!” I imagined myself throwing my arms into the air, saying, *Go ahead, tell Moe! I don’t care anymore!*

A grand exit. I decided against it.

“Look, I have to go. Moe’s expecting me in a few minutes,” Geneva said.

“I’ll tell him you’re on the way.”

She left, and I only followed after I was sure she was gone. Soraya peered at me from around the corner. She’d heard everything. She’d be ready to defend me when the time came. I told her that I didn’t think there was any need. I was a lost cause.

I have to say I was proud of myself, waiting to break down sobbing until I got to my room. Smaug’s terrarium was on the floor because Ed was in the middle of packing. I scooped him up and let him hang out in my pocket until Ed got back.

“How’d it go—oh,” he said when he saw me crying. “I’ll, uh, I’ll just take Smaug out to the car.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier.”

Ed pulled Smaug from my shirt pocket and sat him back down on his favorite log. “I’m the one who should be sorry,” he said. “So...is this it?”

“Soraya says there’s a chance Geneva won’t say anything,” I replied, “but I think I made her pretty mad.”

“Ah.”

Ed didn’t say much else before carrying his things out to the car. He came in and out of the room a few times as I sat at the desk, my head in my hands. By the time I came out of my shock, the sky had lightened to a dawnish blue-gray. Moe was probably in his office again by now. If I was going down, I felt I’d better go out with dignity. One last time, I dragged my feet to his silent office to find him in his chair, which he swiveled so he could face me.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I have some things I wanted to say.” I hung my head. “About everything...”

“I had a talk with Geneva last night,” he said. He leaned back in his swivel chair with his hands behind his neck. “But I also received an email from Soraya this morning.” The warm breeze from the air vent wrapped around the raised hairs along my arms and legs, and I shivered. “She said some things that would corroborate your story. This isn’t about that. This is about you. Please, sit down.”

I sat in the rolling chair beside him. I’d been crying so much that I was thirsty and the tears were still coming, and all I could say was *I’m sorry*. I braced myself for the talk about the bearded dragon and the judicial appointment, but that never came. Instead Moe spoke of my bulletin boards and how they

were the best on the staff. He recounted how many hours I'd spent on door tags, and how he saw that all of my residents had saved them in their rooms instead of throwing them away. He told me how my residents had only kind things to say about me, how many of the other RAs had come to my defense behind my back, and I never knew. And here I was torn up about numbers on a page.

Numbers were just that, he said. Numbers. They didn't define my self-worth. Knowledge would come with time. Mistakes could be rectified. Door tags and kind words were forever, and by those, I'd earned my keep already, and I was welcome back to my position as long as I wanted it.

"I want to have a private conversation with Geneva now, if you don't mind," he said when he had finished. "I'm glad we were able to talk." So I returned to my room. Ed was gone now, as was Smaug, and I resolved to change my theme to dogs or crafts or not-dragons for the spring. I filed the last of my paperwork, packed my bags, and drove home so I could sleep until the start of a better semester.

I'm sorry to say that's about all there is to it. I wish I could tell you that Geneva was brought before HR and promptly fired for picking fights with her coworkers, and I was absolved of the same, but that didn't happen. I wish I could tell you that she got away with everything and I was fired for aiding and abetting my outlaw roommate, because that would make more sense. But I can only tell you that Geneva was not fired, although I do think she was given a talking-to, because she lost that promotion to Soraya. Smaug went to live with Ed's parents, and as far as I know, Geneva never told anybody about him—awfully

nice of her, considering we were never on speaking terms again. Maybe she wasn't lying about that whole team player thing. For my part, I spent the rest of the year trying to get the smell of lizard out of my bedsheets. I ended up having to toss them. I guess you could call that a punishment. They were nice sheets.

It's funny, after a lifetime of reading books and playing games where everything is good and evil, cause and effect, I find myself unable to process a story where that's not the case. Maybe you'll find meaning not in the moral, but in my explanation of the circumstances that came to shape my experience as an RA—but then again, I might've become the person I am today no matter what happened. It could just be a wash. So, I guess the true moral of the story is the point I was trying to make in the first place: If your roommate says they want a bearded dragon, even as a joke, you should say no.

Section 1.2 – Bedbugs

Section 1.3 – Bats

Section 1.4 – Feral Animals

This campus is rather densely wooded and populated with a number of stray cats, most of whom are cute and friendly. They subsist on the kindness of humans—although “subsist” is probably not the right word. More like “get too fat to move.” There is no policy against residents (or RAs, for that matter) leaving food out for them at night, but be forewarned that this place is also home to possums, raccoons, foxes, and occasionally even coyotes, all of which will deplete your supply of cat food well before it reaches its intended recipients.

These guys are also used to people and can appear tame, even friendly, and are so charming that you might feel blessed by their presence. Never let yourself forget that they’re still wild animals. They’re only being nice to you for your food, and they’ve got teeth and claws under all that fur. As much as you might want to have your Snow White moment when you see one, for your safety, and for the safety of the residents in your care, you’d be wise to keep your distance.

Section 2: Trading Shifts [Ask Soraya to write this part]

Section 3: Mental Health and Associated Issues

Section 4: Housing Types

4.1 – Gender-Neutral Housing (Ask Ed to share his experience. He owes me a favor anyway)

Other sections TBD

The Coonhound Blues

On top of a warm blanket in the corner of a living room, a little roan hound came into the world and found that it was full of scents. The scents were all she had at first—her eyes were sealed shut, her long ears folded over and plastered to her wet head, but her nose was open and taking in air as soon as she hit the blanket. By this nose, she could smell her mother and several siblings, and she could smell other beings that were indescribably different from them, all just out of her reach. She could feel that her nest was warm and she was being cleaned off by her mother's tongue, but it was her nose that led her to her mother's belly and her first taste of milk. That was the important thing.

After a while, her ears perked up to better let in the grunts of her siblings. Shortly after that, her eyes opened and developed to see a world cast only in shades of blue and gold. Now she could put a shape to all the other puppies—seven, not counting her—and the enormous dark-furred beast that was her mother, as well as the two-legged animals that came to fawn over them every so often, but these new senses were only supplementary. All they did was put definite edges around the complex profiles her nose had already given her.

She was bigger, louder, more forceful than the other puppies. Of the eight, she was the first to find her voice and start howling for more milk, and the first to rise from a crawl and find her legs strong beneath her. She learned her name—Larkspur—and trotted toward the sound of it before the others even lifted their heads at theirs. But they caught up eventually. Soon, they were at her side bounding across the open backyard and taking in the scents of pine sap and cut grass and woodland creatures she had no images for, but was drawn to

nonetheless. The humans took to pulling fuzzy toys on strings and letting the pups chase after them, and hiding bits of meat away in corners for them to sniff out, all the while watching, measuring.

Larkspur wasn't the first for everything. She was not the first of the pups to disappear from the yard, carried away in the arms of an unfamiliar human, though she may have been the first to notice. First it was Dandelion, then Hyacinth, and Lavender a little later. After each disappearance, she would patrol the yard, tracking their cold trails in figure-eights through the grass, and then move on. They would be back soon. In the meantime, more food for her.

Shorly after Lavender turned up missing, another human came into the yard while the pups were playing. This one was a male, wearing blue fabrics that were smudged with mud, which Larkspur added to as she pushed her paws onto his lower leg.

"Hey, pup," he cooed, kneeling down to her level. He put his hand in front of her muzzle so she could nip at his salty fingers. What a glorious sense taste was, almost as good as smell, though nothing could beat scent for information and utility. With it, she could tell that this human was young and spent a lot of time around cut wood. She kept sniffing at his ankles even after he rose to his feet to speak to Bill, the older male who was their primary caretaker.

"So sorry to just pop in, but I am in the market. I just retired my old hunting buddy..."

Bill nodded. "All pups are three thousand."

"Pretty steep," the young man said, rubbing his head. "I knew that going in."

“You’re paying for quality here.” He gestured to Larkspur tugging on the young man’s pant legs. “Looks like you’ve already made a friend.”

The young man reached to bring Larkspur up against his chest, where she could get an even better sniff at him and his clothing as he massaged her ear. Smoke, different kinds of meat, other dogs. This was perfect.

Bill went on: “This one’s a character. Some of them, you pay for gentleness, ease of training....” The young man nodded in acknowledgment as he pulled a wad of his jacket from Larkspur’s mouth. “This one, you’re paying for potential. You want a show dog, she’s gonna be gorgeous. You want to do trials, she’ll love that. You want a hunter, she’ll be incredible.”

The two humans wandered around the yard, picking up and putting down puppies as Bill explained a bit about each.

“That’s Daisy with the big spot, and there’s Amaryllis in the corner—and you’ve already met Larkspur,” he said, pointing to the spot where Larkspur stood by the young man’s foot. “They’re all named after flowers. We wanted to give them names that smelled different. Course, you can name yours whatever you want.”

“No, no, flowers are nice.” The young man tossed a toy across the yard. Larkspur was the only one not to trip on the way to retrieve it, so she was the one who got to take it in her mouth and parade it in circles around mother, owner, and newcomer. The young human swooped her back up, still holding the toy, and said, “I think I’ll stick with Larkspur.”

“I thought you might,” Bill said. “I’ll get you the papers.”

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Larkspur never left the young man's arms as he walked around the house and away from the property, from her mother and brothers and sisters. He set her down for the car ride, where she sniffed all around her oversized seat and out the open window, but then he picked her back up again and carried her into a new house. Waiting for her inside was another dog, an older black-and-brown hound, whom she had smelled on the young man's clothes and in the car. He got up stiffly from his bed to sniff at her, still held in the man's broad hands, and she sniffed him back.

"Welcome home, Larkspur," the man whispered.

The young man's name was Jack, and the old hound was called Bosco. They stayed quiet for several days, letting Larkspur wander around and get acclimated to her new surroundings. There wasn't much in this house, not nearly as much as the one she was raised in. Nothing to jump and climb on. He had white carpet and white walls, and a white couch to go with them, but he rarely sat on it, instead choosing to sit on the floor by Bosco's bed (usually with Larkspur in it) and stare at the strange moving light-box that was mounted on the wall. He had a kitchen, the most important room in the house, that smelled like meat, bread, dog food, and noxious substances that were tightly sealed and tucked away. The kitchen held a table and a set of matching chairs, which were made of wood that had been recently cut; the wood was so raw that trying to chew on the legs put splinters in Larkspur's mouth.

There was more raw wood about, most of it outside in the backyard. There were planks of pine and cedar, scraps of metal, noisy and dangerous-looking contraptions of human make, and the same noxious chemicals that were present in the kitchen, but in greater

quantity outside. These he kept confined to a shed in the corner of the yard. There were times when Jack would disappear out there alone for some hours. He would say, “Bosco, you’re in charge,” and he’d make noise cutting and hammering the wood. Larkspur played with Bosco, letting him drag her around on the end of a rope until he got tired, at which point she would pace the perimeter of the barren house, searching for any trace of her mother and siblings.

One night, Jack actually sat at his homemade kitchen table—he usually took his meals in the living room—and held Larkspur in his lap as he opened up another moving light-box. This one was free-standing; she’d seen him carry it around and set it up wherever he happened to sit down. She wanted to see what he was doing, but he seemed intent on keeping her below the edge of the table.

Two human voices—one male and one female—began to speak, conversing with Jack, and Larkspur squirmed beneath his hands, wanting to greet the unseen visitors. In response, he only pressed her further into his lap.

“Mom, Dad,” he said, running a hand over Larkspur’s head, “I’ve got a surprise for ya.”

The woman’s voice gasped. “You got the job?”

The voices grew excited, and Larkspur grew excited along with them. There had to be something good going on up there. She squirmed and nipped at Jack’s hands, beseeching him to let her go, and when that didn’t get his attention, she yelped.

In the background, the male voice began to cackle, and the woman’s tone changed to one of anger. “Jack, you *didn’t*.”

“Surprise!” Jack picked Larkspur up from under her front legs, holding her above the table’s edge. There were no humans at the table, only a pair of blurry human-shaped figures inside the light-box. “Say hi to Larkspur!”

“I can’t *believe* you!”

“She’s so cute!” the man said.

“Of all the irresponsible—”

“A bluetick! I always took you for more of a bloodhound kinda guy.”

Jack and the disembodied voices bickered back and forth for some time. Larkspur kept looking around for the source; it wasn’t at the table, and it wasn’t in any of the other rooms. She peered behind the light-box, but there were no humans there, only air. Another human mystery. She lay on the table by the warmth of the box and took in the ever-present calm of Jack’s voice.

“Look, Ma, I’ve been saving up for this ever since Bosco turned five. It’s a lot of money, but trust me. A few months of training and these dogs pay for themselves.”

The woman sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

Jack closed the light-box, and again there was silence. Larkspur’s eyes were half-lidded in the dim light of the kitchen. He picked her up around her chest and held her at arm’s length.

“Can you believe that? They don’t have faith in us,” he said. Larkspur wagged her tail. “Well, we’re just gonna have to prove them wrong.”

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"Okay, one more time. Larkspur, *sit!*"

Larkspur yipped, lunging for the treat between Jack's fingers for the umpteenth time since the sun came up. Again, she missed, and he said the same word, "sit," over again. The stupid human. If he didn't want her to have the treat, he shouldn't have brought it so close to her face.

"Sit!" Jack said again.

Larkspur fell back onto her haunches with a huff, and finally Jack tossed the treat onto the grass in front of her. She bit down for that glorious hit of salt and smokiness and reveled in Jack's obvious excitement.

"Good girl!" he said, readying another treat from his pocket. "Now *sit.*"

That week, with that association fresh in her mind, she mastered "sit." The next week, it was "come," and the week after that, "heel." He started saying the words at random, often when she was otherwise occupied with a very important toy or smell, but she didn't care. She'd do whatever he asked just to get one of those treats. After a few weeks, there were no more words for her to learn, and instead Jack gave her a new toy. It was fuzzy, mostly gray and brown, with a long, striped tail on one end. It smelled like musk and the woodlands surrounding where she was born. An animal pelt of some sort. It squished and tickled inside her mouth as she paraded it around the yard, but then, just when she was really starting to love it, Jack took it away.

“Okay, sit!” he said, and she sat, hoping he would give the toy back. “Now stay. *Stay.*” Instead, he dragged it by the tail in loops around the yard, and Larkspur grew impatient. “Okay, now go!”

Larkspur took off with her nose to the ground, breathing in deep to pick up the scent of her new toy. She followed the trail through the yard, her white-tipped tail flagging above the overgrown grass, the scent growing stronger until she found the toy under her feet.

They played this game every day for what felt like a long time, until one evening she and Bosco loaded up into Jack’s car and were taken to a sprawling forest, just like the one surrounding her old yard. Jack stood at the edge of the treeline, both dogs heeled at his side. “All right, go find it!”

Bosco leaped forward, keeping his nose to the ground as Larkspur did. He padded over rocks and under curved roots, with Larkspur trailing far behind. She smelled what she knew to be raccoon, just like her favorite toy, stronger now, closer.... Bosco cried out and rose to his hind legs, placing his front ones against the trunk of a tree. He let out a series of choppy barks and did not let up until Jack and Larkspur reached his side. Jack shone a bright light up into the canopy, where a pair of yellow eyes stared back at them. There was a burst of noise, so loud it couldn’t have come from any of them, and the raccoon fell to the forest floor, dead.

This became the new game, usually with both Larkspur and Bosco playing. At first, she trailed behind him always, but as their sessions became longer and tougher, so did her legs, and as the leaves began to fall from the trees, she closed the distance. And then when Larkspur tracked a raccoon’s trail up a tree and began to bawl, it was Bosco who had to race

to join her. Many times after that, there was no Bosco at all—just her, Jack, and all the scents of the forest.

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“All right, girl. Today’s your big day,” Jack said one sunset as he fastened Larkspur’s new collar around her neck. “Wanna go for a *ride*?”

Larkspur howled as she leapt to her feet, standing now beside Bosco, who was watching with raised ears. She had grown in recent weeks, and now her head was almost level with his.

“Okay, let’s go!”

The two dogs fought to be first through the door, but the car seating arrangement was always the same: Bosco in the front, Larkspur in the back, each with their nose out the window.

When they arrived at their hunting forest, they were not the only dogs there, nor was Jack the only human. Larkspur spilled out of the car, still getting used to her long limbs, and smelled the scents of dogs like Bosco, dogs she’d never seen before, and—this was amazing—a dog just like her mother, and like her. She put her nose down and huffed at the dirt, following the trail until she looked up and saw another black-and-white mottled hound. He was a male, about Bosco’s size, standing beside a yellow-haired female human. She leapt toward them before Jack could grab her by the collar, and the woman laughed.

“Jack, is this your new dog?” she asked as Jack caught up. “I didn’t know you were thinking about a bluetick!”

“Heya, Annmarie,” Jack said. “I went to the breeder you told me about. She was the pick of the litter! Ain’t she gorgeous?”

“Oh, she’s beautiful. And Bosco, handsome as ever! Hi, Bosco!” Annmarie knelt down to put a hand on each dog’s flank, rubbing heartily. “She’d be a great playmate for Cash.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing!” Larkspur could smell nervous hormones rolling off Jack’s skin as he spoke. “Uh, I’m gonna have some get-togethers at my place to get her more used to people. I’d love for you to come and bring Cash.”

“Sure thing! Just send me the details.”

Larkspur was led by the collar to a line of five other dogs, one of them Cash. She pulled, wanting to race forward and claim all the joy of her birthright, but Jack held on until a gunshot signalled him to let go. Larkspur paid no mind to the other running and baying dogs as she did all she knew how to do, keep her nose low and follow the musky trail until it led up a tree. She reared up and barked over and over, and from somewhere behind her, Jack’s voice yelled, “Strike!”

Again he took her by the collar and lined her up beside the others. “Good girl,” he said. “You won the first round!”

Several more times, she was taken by the collar to the middle of a trail and lined up with the other dogs, only to be released again. Each time, it was another human who called “Strike!”, but just hearing the word was enough for Larkspur. At the end of the night, Jack brought her and Bosco back to the car, fed them each a special treat on the way home, and played with Larkspur in the living room until she was too tired to move.

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Jack spent most of the following days outside, clearing the yard of half-built furniture and debris. He crammed it all into his work shed and brought out his beat-up grill, which carried the scent of pine and liquids of human origin, but smelled most strongly of charred meat. Soon the yard was full of that smell, and the smell of beer, and a forest of human legs to weave through. They all pulled at her ears and babbled nonsense at her. She only played along to get a good sniff at their steaks.

Cash was there, along with his human Annmarie. He, Bosco, and Larkspur romped and played in the yard until almost all of the humans had left. The smells of smoke and meat lingered in wisps. There were crickets, one for every leaf on the ground, or so it sounded. The dogs could barely hear the voices of Jack and Annmarie over the din.

“What about dinner next Friday?”

Annmarie shook her head. “I can’t. I’ve got plans with my friends.”

“Oh...” Jack fell back in his lawn chair a bit, rotating an empty beer can in his hands. “Are you free for lunch on Thursday?”

“Doctor’s appointment,” Annmarie said.

“It doesn’t have to be Thursday. I’m free any day if you want to grab coffee or something.”

Annmarie breathed long and heavy through her nose. “I don’t know, Jack. I’m sure I’ve got something to do.”

She stood from her chair and pulled Cash's leash from her pocket. Cash whined and crouched in the tall grass, trying to appear small, but his wagging tail-tip belied his excitement. Some sort of dog-human game. But Annmarie didn't play along. She clicked her tongue and said, "Come on, dude," with no inflection, so Cash stood up and they left without too many more words.

Jack stood and wiped his hands on his blue denim pants. "A swing and a miss," he muttered. "We'll get her next time."

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For all of autumn, it felt like there was a group hunt every few days, and Larkspur became more and more accustomed to weaving through a crowded forest to find her quarry. More and more often, it was Jack, not any of the other humans, who shouted, "Strike!" Also increasingly often, Jack left these hunts with a stack of papers, smiling wide and singing Larkspur's praises.

The "next time" with Annmarie came after one of these successful hunts, where again she and Jack were the last humans left in the area. Larkspur paid little attention at first, instead focusing on the play-fights with Cash, but both dogs stopped to listen as they sensed their humans growing displeased.

"I mean, it can be whenever you want; I'm free every day—"

"Of course you are," Annmarie muttered, her arms crossed over her chest.

Words flew fast through the air, their voices climbing in pitch and volume until Jack opened his palms to her and asked, "Why not?"

"I don't need a reason!" Annmarie sounded like she was about to start shouting, but then her voice fell. "The truth is, I think I need a bit more stability than what you've got going on. You have no day job—"

"I'm a freelance carpenter," Jack said. Annmarie *tsked*.

"You build furniture in your spare time. Which is all the time. And then you rely on your dog for half your living, and it's just—" All three dogs perked their ears now that they were involved. "It's not sustainable. I'm sorry, Jack. You're a good guy, and a good friend. But I just think it would end in tears."

That was the last Larkspur saw of Annmarie, and Cash with her, for more than a few minutes at each hunt. When the trees started to grow leaves again, and the nights grew shorter, the group hunts fell in numbers and the hunts with just her, Jack, and Bosco became regular. Now she could track the heavily scented trails to completion in minutes, and the cold ones not much slower, and every time she reached a tree with a raccoon in it, Jack would yell "Strike!" Most of the time, he would call Larkspur off and set her loose in another part of the forest, but occasionally, at the end of the session, he would shoot the raccoon and put it in his pack. Then they would start their walk back to the car, Larkspur following at Jack's side and Bosco meandering after them, farther and farther behind each day.

Later that summer, Bosco died.

This was no surprise to Larkspur. Once he merely had trouble keeping pace with her on the hunt; now he could barely make it onto the couch, though he tried to be close to Jack whenever possible. His last few days, he stopped eating, and that's when Jack sat them both in the car and drove to a white-lit building that smelled of dog medicine. This was the same

place Larkspur had gone as a young pup. Jack held Bosco in his arms, keening like a wounded animal as he tried to speak to the vet-humans attending the office and failed.

The vets took Bosco down a long hallway, while Jack stayed in the lobby with Larkspur. She crawled into his lap and licked the salty water droplets from his face, and when that got boring, she laid her head down in his lap so that the droplets could land on her muzzle. After some time, a vet led them down a long corridor and into a metal-lined room, where Bosco was stretched out on a long table. There, Jack laid his hands over Bosco's side and Larkspur lapped at his muzzle until he shut his eyes and did not open them again.

There was no Bosco by Larkspur's side as Jack said his goodbyes to the vets in the lobby, and no Bosco as they walked back to the truck. Larkspur rode in the front seat on the way home, and there she rode every day after that.

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When autumn arrived again, Jack drove Larkspur down to the crowded forest and brought her to where the other dogs were gathered, and it was back to the routine. Annmarie and Cash joined by their side for the first time since the argument. Their words were stilted, but solemn.

"I'm sorry about Bosco," Annmarie said. "Felt like I had to say something. He was a wonderful dog."

"Yeah," Jack replied. Beneath his excitement, his air turned a little sad. "He lived a good life. Happy until the end. Guess that's all you can ask for."

As Jack held Larkspur by the collar, abreast with Cash and the others, he leaned down to her just before the gunshot and whispered, "This one's for Bosco."

Larkspur nearly dove into the ground when Jack let go of her. She moved swiftly, ahead of any other human or dog, and all her other senses shut down to make way for the most important of all. Her long ears stirred the earth and funneled the musk of raccoon into her nose, stronger every step, until she looked up and there it was, halfway to the canopy. Her wide paws thundered over the loam as she charged, howling in excitement, stretching her front legs to touch the tree.

"Strike!"

That was the first strike of many. Each round, Larkspur was quick to put distance between her and the other dogs and hone in on her mark, tracking with no waste of time or motion until she reached a tree and heard Jack's call.

He was extra happy on the drive home that night, probably because of the substantial prize they'd given him. Larkspur got a whole cheeseburger to herself, and he stopped at the pet store on the way home and let her sniff at the open treats until she lunged for some particularly appealing ones. He bought a whole bag full of them and fed several to her, piece by piece, in exchange for shakes and high fives at home.

"You really stole the show back there, girl! I'm so proud of you," he said at last, kneeling to kiss her muzzle. "But I'm beat. What do you say we relax?"

He put the treats on the counter amidst a nest of paintbrushes that he had set out to dry by the kitchen sink, then beckoned her to the sofa. She wasn't interested. Those were the

most delicious morsels she'd ever had. She peered over the countertop and stretched her front paw as far as it could go, snagging the edge of the bag with her frontmost claw, pulling it closer—

"No, no," Jack said, pulling the bag away from her. He stuffed it into the cabinet beneath the sink and wagged his finger. "What is it with you blueticks and food? I swear, that's the last time I pick a dog to impress a girl."

With that, he settled on the couch, turned on the television, and promptly fell asleep. Larkspur would have to do this quietly, but she was determined. She pushed her nose against the side of the cabinet door and rattled it open. He kept all kinds of strong-smelling things in here, things that tickled her nose when she breathed, but behind all that was the heady, everywhere scent of meat. She stretched her neck to the back of the cabinet, behind all the bottles, and pulled at the bag. It came loose from where it was nestled and knocked over a half-open bottle, splashing strong clear liquid all over her muzzle.

With the treats in reach, she breathed long and fast, and everything began to burn, all around and inside her nose. Her skin caught fire. She thrashed and howled out in pain, trying to clear it all away with her paws, but it only spread further. Her eyes stung from the fumes; she shut them to keep whatever this liquid was out as she bolted onto the couch and rubbed against the fabric.

"What? Larkspur, what are you—" Jack stirred from his sleep as she rubbed wet streaks all over his couch, and he started to yell, but then he gasped. "Oh, my God! Larkspur, your nose!" His hands clamped down on the sides of her face, steadying her head against her

writhing body. “*Shh*, let me—” She yelped as his fingers traced burning paths along her skin. “Oh, God.”

Larkspur felt him lifting her into his arms, with no more difficulty than if she were a puppy again. He threw her down into the bathtub, and for once, she made no move to get out or fight against the cold water that he sprayed down the length of her muzzle. The inside of her nose burned all the way down through her throat, but the affected patches of skin began to cool to a bearable sting. At last, she could open her eyes to see Jack swooping to pick her back up and start toward the truck.

Even as Jack fumbled with the locks on the front door and the truck, he kept Larkspur bundled against his chest, her paws hooked over his shoulder as he supported her with one arm. He probably would have kept holding her if only he could see the road, but instead he spilled her headfirst into the seat and swung in beside her. The truck rumbled to life beneath her sideways form and screamed through a sharp turn before she could right herself.

Two or three times, Larkspur tried to get her legs beneath her and rise to look out the window, and each time another turn almost pitched her onto the floorboard. That was all right. She could stay like this. She didn’t have to see where she was to know where she was headed, and as long as she could see Jack’s face, she was calm. His cheeks were wet, shining by the light of the road. In better circumstances, she would have tried to get up there and lick the salt away, but instead she stayed down and pawed at her still-burning nose.

“It’s okay, baby,” Jack whispered. “We’re gonna get you fixed up.”

At the sound of his voice, Larkspur’s tail thumped lightly against the leather. She whined, beseeching him to speak to her again, but he didn’t. The only sound he made was a

whimper not unlike her own. He placed his warm hand over her shoulder, and she let him leave it there for the rest of the ride.

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Larkspur entered the bright halls of the vet's office again draped over Jack's shoulder, where she could feel every quiver of his chest as he spoke. His words were slurred, but the woman who spoke back was calmer.

"Sir, do you have any idea what she got into?"

"Paint thinner," Jack choked out. "I-I don't know. It's clear."

They exchanged more words, and then Larkspur felt herself changing arms, from Jack to—she fought to turn around and look—another woman, this one wearing metal implements, and she yipped in surprise. There were few humans who could hold her like this, and only one of them was here now. The one thing keeping her from fighting free was Jack's soft reassurance, the same words over and over, "It's okay, sweetheart. It's okay."

The vet woman turned to walk down a corridor, the same kind of corridor she'd gone down to be poked with needles, to be prodded and pulled, to see Bosco in his final moments—and away from Jack. She craned her neck to see him where he'd left her, standing next to another man in a blue coat, who said, "Stay here, sir. Let me get you some coffee."

That was the last she saw of him as she entered another room and was half-thrown onto a cold tile floor. She was on her feet and fighting within seconds, aiming to barrel out the door and down the hallway, when a male vet entered and shut her only means of escape.

“We got a live one!” the woman shouted as the man knelt and braced his arms around Larkspur’s body. “Hold her down, hold her down!”

“God, what a fighter!” The man grunted as Larkspur bucked her hips and shoulders under his grasp. Unable to break free, she began to bark with full force, loud as any hunting bawl and sharp like a trapped raccoon. “This one’s gonna wake the whole town.”

She kept going, her core muscles tightening to their limit with every bark. Any moment Jack would hear her cries, burst in and save her; any moment this would all be over. But that moment didn’t come, and on she fought as they pulled on her lips and flushed her nose and stuck her muzzle with needles until it was numb. Her once-tight howls became shapeless as she lost feeling in her lips. She was weary, unsteady on her feet. The two vets sounded calmer now; she lowered her voice as they did theirs, until she forgot how to bark at all. They smiled and massaged her ears, telling her what a good girl she was.

“That’s a powerful instrument you’ve got there,” the woman cooed. “I know what you’re thinking. ‘Where’s Dad, huh? Where’s Dad?’ He’s on his way, hon. You just relax.”

The next thing Larkspur was aware of was Jack kneeling beside her, rubbing her back. She tried to take in his scent, expecting all the complexity of the house and the surrounding forest, but all she got was wood shavings, his signature smell, and her own. He was saying to one of the vets, “You don’t know how much she means to me. Please, this dog is everything to me. Tell me she’ll be all right!”

“Well, it doesn’t appear that she’s ingested anything,” the vet said. “But as for any lasting damage to her nose, we don’t know. We’ll have to keep her in overnight, run some tests in the morning.”

Jack left the room, still tearful, and Larkspur wondered when he would come back. Time began to stutter. She was dragged away into another room filled with cages and other dogs, sick dogs, and left behind a gridded door with only a water dish and a blanket over the cold metal. There she stayed all night, and when she awoke to the sun coming through the room's only window, there was still no Jack. There were only vets prodding her and the sounds of human machines, until one caught her attention with a nice slab of beef jerky right at the end of her muzzle.

Her eyes widened. She hadn't even smelled it until it was right in front of her. She lunged, only to catch a mouthful of air and a chuckle from everyone in the room. Different humans, same old tricks. She was led out of the room, with the vet holding the treat still inside. When they let her back in, the treat-holder showed her his empty hands, and she understood. Jack used to play this game with her all the time. She put her nose to the floor, tracking the faint scent of meat in circles, behind chairs, under the feet of every human in the room. The scent never got stronger, and as she tracked without success, she became angry and whined until the treat man reached behind the garbage can and pulled it out.

The other vets hummed. "That just about confirms it," one said. "Dad's not gonna be happy to hear about this."

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By the time Jack came to pick her up, which she only knew from the sound of his voice coming from somewhere down the corridor, Larkspur's weariness had worn off. Her limbs were strong beneath her once more, so she thought nothing of jumping into his arms when they took her into the open lobby. He was here! He was here to take her home and life would

resume as normal. She licked his salty face like she'd been wanting to do since last night, but he didn't laugh. He didn't even smile. She pulled her head back to look over his downcast face. Something was wrong.

"This is the best hunting dog I've ever known," he said to a vet. "All but keeps me fed. Are you sure she's not going to get better?"

"Well, she's retained a lot, and she may regain some function over time. But I don't think her nose will ever be what it once was."

"I—" Jack shuddered. "I understand. Thank you so much for your help. Really, I'm just glad my baby's okay."

All the way home and through the following days, Jack spoke very little. His most frequent word, at least the one that Larkspur recognized, became "no." The first few times, she slunk away from him, not knowing what she'd done wrong, but then she realized that these were a different kind of *no*. He usually said the word with such intention and purpose, often while pointing to a chewed-up sock or an overturned trash can. Now he said it at random intervals while wandering forlorn around the house, for no apparent reason. He still treated her kindly. He would invite her to sit next to him and splash some of his beer onto the floor for her to lap up, like always. He drank a lot of beer these days. But he rarely laughed, and he always cried, and he only played fetch and tug-of-war with a limp arm.

If not for Jack's near-constant sorrow, Larkspur would have been in fine spirits. The inside of her nose stopped stinging, although it never felt exactly normal, and she did have trouble picking out the individual scents—raccoon, pinewood, kudzu vines—by which she once mapped her world. But she could smell when dinner was imminent, which was

important, and she could smell Jack and hints of Bosco even still. The burned patches on her head flaked away to reveal clean, marbled skin, and eventually fur as the moons passed. Her eyesight had been spared in the accident; she used it to watch for squirrels during the day and possums at night, and when she saw one, she still had the voice to howl. She could still run and play in the yard while Jack worked on his furniture, which he did more frequently now. Whatever he was upset about, it couldn't have been her, because she was happy.

Occasionally, she and Jack would still load up in the truck and spend all night hunting. This was the only time Larkspur felt anything like the upset that plagued Jack, as the forest teased her with the untraceable scent of raccoon hidden beneath a cover of leaves. Their first hunts turned no results, until Larkspur started to look up from the loamy ground and into the treetops for prey. Once in a great while, there would be one there, staring down at her from the canopy, and her instincts would take over like they always had.

The rest of the summer passed, and then autumn faded into winter. During winter, they didn't do any hunting, and Jack did a lot less work out in the yard. He'd perked up some since the accident, but now that it was cold out, he seemed slow again. His cheekbones grew sharp, and his eyes seemed to recede further into their sockets. He had to push a load of beer cans off the table before he would talk to the images of Mom and Dad on his computer. During one of these talks, when Larkspur lay on top of Jack's feet below the table, she could hear an urgency in their voices that was never there before.

"Jack, you're so thin!" Mom's voice said. Jack hummed slightly. "Have you been eating?"

"I've just been trying to keep the dog fed." At the word "dog," Larkspur raised her head into Jack's lowered hand. "Business will pick back up again in a few months. It'll all be fine."

"Son..." Dad said, and then he didn't speak anymore.

After that, a new sorrow overtook Jack. While Larkspur could momentarily lift the old one by licking his face and jumping around, this one became the most pronounced when she was nearby. He spoke to his phone frequently, always saying her name, but he wasn't talking to her. One day, he wandered around the house gathering her toys, like he always did, but when he was done, he picked up her full toy basket and carried it out to the truck. This got Larkspur's attention. She padded after him into every room in the house, whimpering as he gathered her bed, her favorite blanket, and her food, and tossed it all onto the bed of his truck. There was no way she'd let him drive away without her now. When he opened the door, she leapt past him and into her seat, daring him to even try and move her.

"Good girl," he said as he settled into his own seat. "Let's ride."

After a while, they arrived at a new house in an open countryside. This one had a metal fence stretching around the whole house, and, to Larkspur's delight, Annmarie and Cash were standing in the front yard. She howled in greeting, to which Cash howled back and started waving his tail. That was all it was, then. Just a human-dog playdate.

For hours, the two dogs romped and played outside, chasing each other in circles around the big fenced-in yard and sharing toys while Jack and Annmarie talked on the porch.

"Thank you for doing this," Jack said as the sun began to set. "I'm sorry about everything. I just hope it doesn't come back to Larkspur."

“Hey, whatever happens with you, you know how I feel about your dog.”

Jack smiled. “It makes me feel better knowing she’ll have somebody who loves her.” Then he called Larkspur’s name and knelt in front of her when she came running. “You be a good girl, okay? This is just until I get back on my feet. I’ll come visit sometimes.” His voice cracked, and he leaned forward to touch his nose to hers. “You stay. I love you.”

With that, Jack walked out of the yard and shut the gate behind him, just in front of Larkspur’s nose. He got in his truck and rolled away, and she watched until it was out of sight. He’d be back soon. He had to come back.

In the meantime, she was happy to spend her days playing with Cash in the open yard and her evenings curled up beside Annmarie, her head resting in her lap. She sensed that Annmarie loved her, and Larkspur loved her back, but it wasn’t like Jack’s love. There was a lot more active petting and cuddling involved with Annmarie. The one thing that remained the same was the hunting. When the springtime came, Annmarie would take her and Cash into the nearby forest and let them go. Larkspur followed Cash’s lead as he tracked the scents of woodland animals through the trees, and they would usually spot their quarry and start barking at the same time. Annmarie never killed anything; it was always just scratches and “good boy, good girl” once she caught up to them. Then she’d take them out for human food and spend the rest of the night playing fetch.

A few times during the spring, Jack’s truck rolled into the driveway, and Larkspur always charged out the door and into his arms. He was happier now, always laughing when she licked him or tripped over her own paws, and his face was fuller each time she saw him. Every time, she would follow him to the gate to jump in his truck, and every time, he would

shut it ahead of her and leave. Then she would watch him through the fence, and wait for him from the inside window the rest of the night.

The evening after one such time, Larkspur heard Annmarie saying, “I don’t know if these visits are any good for her, Jack.” Her ears pricked at the sound of his name. “She always stares out the window for hours after you leave. She’s staring at me now. She hears you.”

Jack’s voice—or a projection of Jack’s voice, like with Mom and Dad on the computer—came from where Annmarie was sitting. Larkspur began to whine.

“I—I just...” Jack’s voice sputtered. Larkspur barked sharply. “I’ll mail you her papers.”

Summer passed with neither sight nor sound of Jack, as did autumn and winter. Perhaps someday he would come back. Annmarie always came back after she went away, that was true, but her mother never came back, and her siblings never came back. Maybe it was just the nature of things to come back after a short time, but not after seasons. So during the spring, just after ten more little roan hounds were born into a world full of scents, she wasn’t expecting Jack to be the first human to come see them.

“Hi, baby!” Jack knelt down in the grass, and Larkspur waddled over as fast as she could manage with several puppies pawing at her. She rolled into his lap headfirst, tongue lolling, back legs kicking at his face. “I heard you’re a mama now. Are these your puppies? They’re so cute!”

Larkspur rolled back onto the grass and herded her litter into a circle, looking to Jack for appraisal.

“Aww. ‘Look what I made, human!’ They’re very cute,” he said, smiling. “Fresh-baked pups.”

“You can have whichever one you want,” Annmarie said from behind.

“You really don’t have to do that. I *can* pay.”

Annmarie shook her head. “Not a chance. You gave her to me. That’s payment enough.”

“Well, in that case, I think I’ll just take ‘em all!” Larkspur looked on as Jack scooped up and held each pup in turn. He stopped at one in particular, her smallest male, who was always content to sit and watch the world go by while the other puppies squirmed and played.

“What’s this little guy’s name?”

“Cedar.”

“He’s perfect.”

“I thought you’d go for more of a scrapper,” Annmarie said. Jack shrugged.

“Nah. I mean, I’ve got work to worry about now. I just don’t have the time for another one of those.” He leaned to nuzzle Larkspur’s broad forehead, still cradling Cedar in one arm.

“No offense, girl.”

“Okay. Well, if you’re sure, I’ll get you the papers.”

From then until he left, Jack never let go of Cedar, just as he’d never let go of her when he brought her home in his hands. Once, he knelt down in front of Larkspur and let her sniff

them both, and again she faintly smelled meat and hide along with her pup's own scent. He nuzzled her and scratched her chin. He said goodbye.

"Until next hunt," he said. "You be good. I love you."

After he shut the door, Larkspur took a respite from her puppies atop the chair by the front window. Jack's truck roared, and once again she watched as it rolled down the street until it turned out of sight.

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